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THE CALL FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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I.

THE MODERN SITUATION.

Speaking generally, modern man finds himself with no roots : with no sense of community : with no conception of personality. He lives, as T. S. Eliot puts it :

> ". . . dispersed on ribbon roads,
> And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour
> Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance.
> But all dash to and fro in motor cars,
> Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.
> Nor does the family ever move about together,
> But every son would have his motor cycle,
> And daughters ride away on casual pillions."

Yet he is aware of a pure community, characteristic of all Christian fellowship, which takes shape in the form of visible communities throughout history. Examples of these radical and gallant efforts to realise the Sermon on the Mount in all its purity he can trace at the hands of the Apostles, the Fathers, the Anabaptists. And, in his own day, side by side with disruptive economic and political forces, he finds struggling groups of idealists attempting the same thing.

The Oxford Conference on Church Community and State, in the face of the present disintegration of social life, called for new, bold and prophetic experiments in Christian living, which might show the pattern for the recovery of community. This call is based on the belief that through the Incarnation there is community of God with man, through which men learn of the true nature of community with each other.

This pamphlet, which is greatly indebted to a paper on " The Theology of Community," given by Dr. A. E. Garvie at Kempshead Hall in January, 1938, is an attempt to relate the call for community life to the heart of the Christian faith. It seeks to show unequivocally that the Church is the one environment for fostering true community, which is essential for the fulfilment of personality, and is a call to Christians to consider these claims and act upon them.

Issued on behalf of, and with the approval of, The Christian Social Council, 29, Gordon Square, W.C.1.

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II.

PERSONALITY THROUGH COMMUNITY.

Personality, taught Jesus, is sacred, to be realised in its fulness only in giving, serving and sharing. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." The divine paradox of soul making is that to lose one's soul is to gain it; it is the way of creative resurrection, and it is the only way. Self-realisation can only come through self-sacrifice and self-surrender. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

So Jesus taught, but in this age of getting, exploiting and hoarding, it is hard to believe this. Yet we must, for it is a fundamental fact. Life stirs at centres and looks beyond itself for extension. Thus a fundamental fact about a human being is that he is a social creature. He enters the world through a family group, and spends a life of fellowship of one sort and another in a variety of groups. "Wherever we find him," says Dr. Temple, "at whatever stage of development, we find some form of community. The mutual need of the sexes is the simplest and deepest instance of this; and with that goes the long period through which the child needs parental protection and care. The Family is the root fact, and however far civilisation advances, it grows like a tree from that root."

There is, therefore, no such thing as an individual in the abstract. The logic of the situation is that man of himself is hardly a real person. Only in relationship with others is he ever himself. We cannot really understand an individual as an individual, but only as an individual in community. Man essentially realises himself in community. Community is essential to personality, and personality is essentially a social product. The fundamental error of the individualism we have already considered, is that it places the individual at the centre of his own universe, whereas he is indissolubly related to his fellows.

There is tension between the claims of the individual and of community. The individual is formative of community, community is formative of the individual. While there is a half truth at least in Whitehead's much criticised phrase, "Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness," let us note that religion is bound up with how the individual expresses himself in fellowship. "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar."

Now, in all relations, as, for example, between friends, brethren or lovers, master and servant, parent and child, husband and wife, there is a blending of personalities, and, thereby, a break through into a world of spiritual values. The essential characteristic of personality, it has been suggested, is a capacity for love, and it does not seem too bold to submit that through any human relationship, soul can get knit to soul in love. The moment we engage in personal relations, we pass from mere instinctive association to moral fellowship, and the further we advance the deeper we get into a spiritual relationship. Let us again quote T. S. Eliot :

> "What life have you if you have not life together?
> There is no life that is not in community,
> And no community not lived in praise of God."

III.

COMMUNITY IN GOD.

We are the sons of the living God. "My soul thirsteth for God," sings the Psalmist. "My heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God." "The living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father," declared Jesus. "For as the Father hath life in Himself, so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself . . . because He is the Son of man."

God the living, for whom we crave, is revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or, as stated in the Apostolic Benediction, in "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost." In the grace of Jesus Christ, the eternal reality of the love of God is historically revealed, and is personally experienced by us as the communion of the Holy Spirit. To this divine unity we may well apply the term *community*, for in the inner life of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the ideal of community is perfectly realised. In it we see the whole-ness, the one-ness, and the fulness of life.

Whatever we attempt to say of the Godhead will be inadequate, for we shall be attempting to define the indefinable. "Whereas it is by faith alone that we should worship the Father, reverence the Son, and be filled with the Spirit," complained St. Hilary of Poitiers, "we are obliged to strain our weak human language in the utterance of things beyond its scope."

And so to make intelligible the reality of the "One Absolute Actuality" who is God, in whom we see three personal centres, we think of the Father and the Son dynamically related through the Holy Spirit in a bond of love, the eternal issue and process of the Divine Being. God, we say, exists in an eternal relationship of love with His Son. Love is the social element : the eternal mode of life in the Godhead.

The essence of divine community, then, is divine love. But how can we conceive of that love?

Love, as we know it in our own lives, is a relationship in which the whole personality goes out towards another. "The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul." As love is conceivable only as a relationship between subject loving and object loved, so in the Godhead we conceive of difference-in-unity. We conceive of a reciprocal relationship between the Father and the Son in love; and the actual bond of union we conceive of as personal, in fact as a co-equal Personal Spirit.

This idea of difference-in-unity is true of all our personal experience. While any experience is a single fact, bound up in it is the act of experiencing and that which is experienced. Ourselves we only discover in relation with others, and in terms of that relationship. The distinction we make between ourself and the other, as between subject and object, is a distinction within our whole experience. In a sense it is true to say that both are reciprocally determined.

Thus for a true conception of life, we are driven to examine life in community; and for a true conception of life in community, we are driven to accept the Godhead as our pattern, and to attempt to conceive of the life therein. But this is not without precedent. The same situation is found

in original discussion on the nature of personality in man, the motive and occasion for undertaking which were due to, and followed in time upon, theological discussion as to the nature of personality in God.

But how, we might now ask, is this love in community as known in the Godhead, communicated to man? The answer is given in the Incarnation.

IV.

INCARNATION.

"God, Who at sundry times and in different manners, had spoken unto the fathers by the prophets, spoke by His Son, His appointed heir of all things, by whom He also made the worlds : Who, being in the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person, upholds all things by the word of His power." God became incarnate in a Jew of the first century, thus disclosing Himself to men at a particular time and under particular conditions, within a definite social and economic setting, involving real historical limitations.

Of this man Jesus, it is recorded that He was truly human : but that, throughout His life, Divine Power broke through His human form, so that men beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of His Father. "Being the Son of God," states St. Paul, "He thought it not robbery [Gr. a thing to be grasped at] to be equal with God : but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men : and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

Though equal with the Father, He was throughout His life and ministry subordinate to Him. Through the Spirit, the Love of the Father was made manifest in the Grace of the Son. "Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of Myself : but the Father that dwelleth in Me, He doeth the works." The Son of God became the Son of Man, thus indentifying the sons of God with the Father Who had created them in His own image. Through Christ, God came stooping, seeking, and suffering to save the children He had made for Himself.

In Christ as the incarnate Son of God, there is, therefore, not only community with God, but also community of God with man. There is a shared life : a community of experience. In the action and passion of Christ, love which is the eternal nature of God, is revealed in all its tenderness, its richness and its depth, as the eternal purpose for man. Alice Meynell speaks for us all when she says :

> "Thou art the Way.
> Hadst Thou been nothing but the goal,
> I cannot say
> If Thou hadst ever met my soul."

How are we to realise this truth of the Incarnation in our lives together?

V.

REALISATION OF COMMUNITY.

The shared life is the most real life. Fellowship calls for the exercise of faculties which it alone stimulates. In a very real sense we become new men in fellowship. It lifts us to a level of experience we could not otherwise reach. In it we are caught up with our fellows in a profound social consciousness. We are embraced as it were in a sort of new entity which our social efforts seem to have created, in which we live as fellow sharers and creators.

The nation is an obvious example of the common life. Contrary to the general opinion, the nation, on close enquiry, turns out to be mainly neither a physical fact, a racial group, nor a political structure, but a spiritual fellowship; and nationality is seen distinctively to be the consciousness of belonging to this fellowship. Its essence is merely a corporate sentiment, a shared experience, a sense of belonging together, a strongly held feeling or belief, which, of course, remains the experience of the individual. "It is what it is," says a modern political philospher of the nation, "in virtue of a common mental substance, resident in the minds of all its members—common memories of the past, common ideas in the present, common hopes for the future, and above all a common and general will issuing from the common substance of memories, ideas and hopes."

Deeper still of course, is the common life of a worshipping community. Here we become aware of a common possession, which experienced through communion with God, and with each other, binds us as a community. As we surrender ourselves more and more to each other, and so to God : as we evidence more interest in, and set more value by, and seek more after the good of our fellows : we become more possessed by, and possessed of this common life. We feel in fact that we are working in response to a Divine urge; that we are co-operating with a Divine spirit; that we are being led, tutored, and sustained by a Personal Spirit, indwelling and active within creation. By the spirit of adoption, we cry "Abba, Father." "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." We learn, in fact, the significance of our Lord's command to us to love God by serving our neighbour. "If a man love Me, he will keep My word : and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make our abode with him."

So in the depth of our love for our fellows, we are related to the Godhead, and partake of eternity. "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." We are aware of a mutual relationship as sons with God, which is analagous to the mutual relationship of the Father and the Son; but we love, because God first loved us; because the love of God has been revealed in Christ, and made actual in our lives. The ultimate goal of human fellowship and love, therefore, is fellowship and love as in the Godhead. "God is love; he that abideth in love abideth in God, and God abideth in him." The choicest fruit of religious experience is a mystical experience of love, which can only be described in terms as of a marriage with the Divine. The soul is best satisfied when it recognises as the highest level of religious experience, the antitype of the most intimate forms of human love. "For love is of God; and everyone that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God."

VI.

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY.

If life, therefore, is to prosper it must find its roots in community, and be taken up into common interests and common activity. But those in the community must see their common source in the love of God as their motive, and in the grace of Christ as their method. Moreover, they must find their common resource in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The Church, which is the Redeemed Community, the Body of Christ, the Community of the Spirit, is this common environment. " As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body," so also, says St. Paul, " is Christ. For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink in the one Spirit." This body, St. Paul maintained, was for ever " building up." Its goal was the " measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . . from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

Thus conceived, the Church is the earthly pattern of the Divine life : the dynamic design of what God wills human society to be : the source of transforming power for achieving the Way. The Church must therefore claim to be the vehicle for achieving full community. Upon the Church falls the distinctive responsibility to promote that community through which alone personality can come to fulfilment. The Church must make a distinction, therefore, between the values it seeks to enshrine, and those of any other body. The sacredness of personality realised through self-sacrificing holy love, it must, for example, contrast with the general claim for the development of personality through democracy, ethical altruism, or good comradeship. The purposiveness of community within the Church must be contrasted with the fragmentary purposes of ad hoc groups brought together in order to achieve the highest expediency possible through their co-operation. And the necessary implication must be pressed, of the need for fully conscious individual entry into full membership of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, in order to share in the promotion of Christian community, as compared with a liberal and possibly casual assuming and relinquishing of membership with various groups within an unspecified community whole.

In contrast to these claims, however, it is a reasonable question to ask : Can true community, in fact, be seen in the Church? The answer to this question can only be, come and see. For, as Jeremiah so vividly said, " It is useless to be content to say, The Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord, are these."

VII.

TOWARDS CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

The marks of Christian Community are distinctive and unmistakable; their absence is no less noticeable. " I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus," declared St. Paul; and the group is but the individual writ large.

The spirit of community can only prevail where there is commonalty. Barriers of class, creed, and race deny it. There must be spontaneity : unity of spirit rather than uniformity of organisation : difference-in-unity as well as unity-in-difference. Each member must be subject to the other, and all surrendered to God.

Such communities are essentially groups which act in love. In love, energy and funds will tend to be shared, though there can be no established pattern for the sharing. In such groups love is no longer an abstraction, and the Spirit a theological term, but both a vital presence which can be felt and known.

But such groups do not abound, though many feel a pressing need for them to-day. In suffering are they conceived—" born in strong agony," to borrow from an actual experience. They cannot be brought into being by enactment in committee or assembly. The Spirit, in this as in all his work, bloweth where he listeth. There must first be the desire to add to faith, the necessary virtue, knowledge, restraint, patience and godliness, which, through brotherly kindness, leads on to love in community. Though in actual fact, by attempting to live as in community the rest is often learned and added.

The first step, therefore, seems to be to question whether the groups in which we now stand are plastic to the spirit. Invariably, as has been submitted in a previous pamphlet, we shall see the need for our large groups and organisations to divide into small cell-groups, even as certain animal bodies divide into cell-units, loosely connected, though dynamically related by threads of vital life, all motile and moving in the same general direction. These cell-groups will find their deepest life and their most valuable function when either evidencing in themselves *full* community, or relating themselves to experimental community groups.

This is the day for experiments, and both within and without the Church, community life is being tried in many different ways. As to those within the Church, it must be confessed that we have to look more to the fringe, where rather larger bodies than the cell groups envisaged, are conducting their experiments, usually in a somewhat radical fashion. In the Cotswolds, for example, the *Bruderhof Community* of some two hundred men, women and children of several nationalities is living a completely common life, to witness to the practical possibility here and now of a life based on love, and lived in accordance with Christ's teaching about the Kingdom of God. *The Brotherhood of the Way*, comprising three orders : a preaching order, an order of industrial guilds, and an order of local groups, the full members of which are communicant members of the Anglican Church, has for its mission the preaching on a Franciscan basis of the message of the Kingdom of God, and the application of this teaching in the realm of industry. *The Community of the Way* in the East End of London, is a community centre for a number of families for work, study and prayer, with plans for a fuller community life as a group, outside of London.

These are but samples of the various different efforts now being made towards full community. All are in their infancy, but already some offer literature which regularly records their experiences, as for instance : *The Plough* (*Bruderhof*) ; *Towards* (*Order of Friends*) ; *The Adelphi* (*The Adelphi Centre*) ; *Church and Community* (*Community of S. Hilda*).

An open door, is, without exception, the rule of these adventures, and so serious enquiry is welcomed. As far as possible, they are being traced and linked together, and further information will be gladly supplied by the Hon. Secretary of the Community Service Committee ("Chancton," Dartnell Park, West Byfleet, Surrey) and by the Hon. Assistant Secretary of the Christian Social Council.

. . . . . .

Obviously, these experiments in full community, however absorbing and adventurous, cannot be taken as ends in themselves. They have, of course, an intrinsic value, but they have a function as part of a larger whole. A family has an intrinsic value, but it cannot realise itself in isolation. Families find themselves as they are fulfilled within community. So real community experiments will fulfil their essential function only as they are consciously and organically related to the whole. They should be the "little leaven which leaveneth the lump." Within them, as within the experiments more closely related to the ordinary life of the Church, must be worked out the principle of community, as pattern and motive, for wider application in the society of which, as cells, they are part.

NOTE.—Previous pamphlets in this series are :

No. 1 : A Call to the Critical (George H. Gibson).
No. 2 : The Call of Oxford (Malcolm Spencer).
The cost of these pamphlets is 1d. each ; 5s. per 100.